



## **Israel's Flight from South Lebanon 20 Years On**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Israel's May 2000 rushed evacuation of its security zone in south Lebanon and the desertion of its longstanding local allies there tarnished the Jewish State's deterrent posture and helped spark a string of large-scale armed confrontations with Hezbollah (2006), the PLO (the so-called "al-Aqsa Intifada"), and Hamas (2008/9, 2012, 2014). The withdrawal transformed south Lebanon into an ineradicable terror entity that can harass northern Israel at will and expedited Hezbollah's evolvment into a formidable military power armed with 150,000 rockets and missiles capable of reaching anywhere in Israel. It also dented the IDF's fighting ethos and operational competence, as illustrated by its lukewarm performance during the Second Lebanon War (2006) and Operation Protective Edge (2014).

In the dead of the night on May 24, 2000, 18 years after invading Lebanon with the expressed goal of removing the longstanding terrorist threat to its northern towns and villages, Israel hurriedly vacated its self-proclaimed security zone in south Lebanon and redeployed on the other side of the border. With PM Ehud Barak authorizing the operation a day earlier to avoid its disruption by the Hezbollah terror organization, which had long harassed the Israeli forces in Lebanon, the evacuation was executed without a single casualty.

Yet the humiliation attending the IDF's flight under Hezbollah fire, leaving behind heavy weapons and military equipment (some of which were promptly bombed by the Israeli air force to deny them to Hezbollah), as well as its abandonment of the South Lebanon Army (SLA), which had aided its counterterrorist operations for years and which collapsed upon the withdrawal with many of its fighters and their families seeking asylum in Israel, was not lost on outside observers. A prominent leftwing Israeli

journalist, by no means hostile to the withdrawal, even compared “[the scent of humiliation \[that\] permeated the air](#)” to that attending the “last helicopter on the [US] embassy roof in Vietnam.”

### **Shattered deterrence**

Keenly aware of these disturbing images, Barak quickly extolled the flight as a glowing success that in one fell swoop ended Israel’s “18-year Lebanese tragedy” and neutralized Hezbollah’s terrorist threat to the Galilee. “To fight against terrorism is like fighting mosquitoes,” he told [Time Magazine](#):

You can chase them one by one, but it’s not very cost-effective. The more profound approach is to drain the swamp. So we are draining the swamp [by leaving Lebanon] ... Once we are within Israel, defending ourselves from within our borders, the Lebanese government and the Syrian government are responsible to make sure that no one will dare hit Israeli civilians or armed forces within Israel. Any violation of this might become an act of war, and it will be treated accordingly. I don’t recommend to anyone to try us once we are inside Israel.

This buoyant prognosis couldn’t be further from the truth. Far from draining Hezbollah’s “terrorist marsh,” the withdrawal served to expand it to gargantuan proportions as Hezbollah exploited the demise of Israel’s security zone to transform south Lebanon into an ineradicable military stronghold crisscrossed with fortified defenses, both above ground and in a complex underground tunnel system, designed to serve as a springboard for terror attacks on Israeli territory; to shelter Hezbollah’s burgeoning rocket and missile arsenal (which quickly doubled after the withdrawal [from 7,000 to 14,000](#)); and to exact a high cost from attacking forces in the event of a general conflagration. Hence the IDF’s inconclusive ground operations in the Second Lebanon War (July 12-August 14, 2006), which hardly ventured more than a few miles from the border during the 34 days of fighting—in stark contrast to the 1982 invasion, which swiftly swept across this area and reached Beirut within five days. Hence the war’s relatively high human toll: 164 fatalities, or 70% of [those killed in the security zone](#) during the 15 years preceding the 2000 withdrawal.

Nor did Barak’s warning against any attempt “to try us once we are inside Israel” (and for that matter FM David Levy’s threat that “[Lebanon will burn](#)” in the event of terror attacks from its territory) make an impression on Hezbollah. With Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah famously deriding Israel as “weaker than a spider web,” the organization launched repeated attacks on targets in northern Israel at a rate of half-a-dozen per year. These began as early as October 7, 2000—a mere four months after the withdrawal—

with the abduction of three IDF soldiers on a border patrol (who, it later transpired, were killed in the attack), culminating in the July 12, 2006 abduction of two more soldiers (who, too, were killed in the process) and the killing of another three in a cross-border raid that triggered the Second Lebanon War. During that war, Hezbollah fired some 4,000 rockets and missiles on Israeli towns and villages—the largest attack on the Jewish State’s population centers since the 1948 War of Independence—killing 45 civilians, inflicting massive destruction and economic damage, and driving thousands of Israelis to flee their homes to the southern parts of the country.

While the Israeli architects of the war, which was censured by an official commission of enquiry as “[a great and grave blunder](#),” sought to portray it as a shining success that led to a prolonged period of calm, the conflagration did not deter Hezbollah from sporadic attacks on Israeli targets in subsequent years or from substantially expanding its military buildup in flagrant violation of [Security Council Resolution 1701](#), which had ended the war. This included the expansion of its already substantial rocket/missile holdings to a monstrous 150,000-strong arsenal and the deployment of thousands of well-armed and battle-hardened fighters in south Lebanon on a constant state of alert to invade Israel en masse, either directly or via offensive underground tunnels penetrating Israeli territory (some of which were destroyed by the IDF in 2019).

Even the postwar relative lull has had less to do with the Lebanon War’s deterrent effect (though Nasrallah later admitted he would have foregone the soldiers’ abduction had he known it would lead to full-scale war) than with Hezbollah’s decade-long immersion in the Syrian civil war and the reluctance of its Iranian patron to unleash its protégé’s full might absent a direct Israeli attack on its nuclear weapons installations. Had PM Netanyahu and Defense Minister Barak’s purported intention to launch such an attack in 2010-11 not been nipped in the bud by their security establishment and the Obama administration, an all-out Hezbollah-Israel war would probably have ensued. As it is, such a conflagration remains a distinct possibility, as Hezbollah’s security threat via both its rocket/missile arsenal, which can hit any part of the Jewish State, and ability to invade Israel and occupy Israeli localities is infinitely greater than it was in May 2000.

### **Sparkling the Palestinian war of terror**

Defending his Lebanon decision 20 years later, Barak argued that the withdrawal [improved Israel’s military position vis-à-vis the Palestinians](#) since the IDF’s continued presence in Lebanon would have seriously constrained its ability to launch Operation Defensive Shield (April 2002), which curbed the

Palestinian war of terror (euphemized as “the al-Aqsa Intifada”) that had begun a year-and-a-half earlier.

As with his claim that the Lebanon flight neutralized Hezbollah’s terrorist threat, this assertion is not only false but the inverse of the truth: had the humiliating Lebanon flight not occurred, the “al-Aqsa Intifada” might not have ensued in the first place, at least not in its unprecedented massive scale.

Like most of their Arab brothers, the Palestinians viewed the Lebanon flight as a defeat of the formidable Israeli army by a small but determined guerrilla force. Hamas and Islamic Jihad applauded Hezbollah’s achievement as proving the indispensability of the “armed struggle” while thousands of Palestinians celebrated the withdrawal with placards saying “Lebanon Today, Palestine Tomorrow.” Even Israeli Arabs were increasingly [drawn into Hezbollah’s widening terror and spying web](#) inside Israel in the years following the withdrawal.

More importantly, the flight’s humiliating nature helped convince PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, who viewed the Oslo “peace process” (launched in September 1993) as a strategic means not to a two-state solution but to the substitution of a Palestinian state for the state of Israel, that the pros of reverting to wholesale violence far exceeded its potential cons since Israel no longer had the stomach for a protracted conflict. If Israelis couldn’t bear 20-25 fatalities per year (less than a tenth of the death toll on their roads) in the fight against Hezbollah, surely they wouldn’t be able to stomach the much heavier death toll attending a protracted all-out Palestinian “resistance campaign.” At the July 2000 Camp David summit that sought to reach a comprehensive Palestinian-Israeli peace agreement, Arafat explicitly warned his Israeli counterparts that “we can see to it that the Hezbollah precedent is replicated in the territories,” and that threat was quickly amplified by his top henchmen. A Palestinian public opinion poll found two-thirds of respondents eager to see their leadership follow in Hezbollah’s violent footsteps.

This is indeed what happened with the outbreak of the “al-Aqsa Intifada” in September 2000—the bloodiest and most destructive confrontation between Israelis and Palestinians since the 1948 war—which exacted over 1,000 Israeli lives. And while West Bank terrorism was largely curbed in the early 2000s through sustained counterinsurgency operations and the construction of a security barrier, the Gaza Strip has become a formidable terror entity that represents a clear and present danger to the vast majority of Israel’s population. While it can be contained through repeated military campaigns (e.g., in 2008-9, 2012, and 2014), it cannot be eradicated altogether.

## **Weakening the IDF**

A major plank of Barak's justification of the withdrawal was its supposed benefits for the IDF. "If we act to change reality in the right direction, it strengthens us. It doesn't weaken us," he told [\*Time Magazine\*](#) after the withdrawal. "I didn't see a single armed force that became stronger or a nation that became more self-confident by fighting guerrillas in another country."

There is of course a world of difference between a great power fighting guerrillas thousands of miles from its homeland and a small state defending its citizens and population centers from terrorist attacks launched from across the border, even if this means taking the fight to the aggressing state's territory. By abdicating this crucial component of self-defense, the Lebanon flight not only brought a terror organization committed to Israel's destruction within a stone's throw of its border neighborhoods and made its dislodgement from this area exceedingly difficult: it also dented the IDF's fighting ethos and operational competence. The daring, enterprising, and proactive spirit that had characterized this force from its inception gave way to a reactive, dogmatic, and passive disposition that responded to events rather than anticipating them and that contented itself with containing rather than defeating the enemy.

In fairness to Barak, this transformation reflected a conceptual malaise that had been pervading the IDF's top echelon for some time. This malaise deepened with the launch of the Oslo "peace process," whereby striving for victory was replaced by a conviction that the changing nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict—from interstate wars to low-intensity warfare between Israel and terrorist/guerrilla organizations—made military decisions virtually impossible because these (far weaker) groups represented "authentic resistance movements," to use [Barak's own words](#), that needed to be politically appeased.

This approach, which effectively handed off responsibility for defeating terrorism to the political leadership, was first manifested in the IDF's failure to suppress the Palestinian intifada (1987-93). Here too, Barak played a key role in his capacity as deputy chief of staff (1987-91) and chief of staff (1991-95), and which only ended upon the signing of the Oslo Accords. It received a major impetus with the May 2000 Lebanon flight and the delusion of removing Hezbollah's terrorist threat via political retreat, and was repeated during the "al-Aqsa Intifada's" first months—when the IDF (under the direct leadership of defense minister Barak) sought to contain rather than suppress the conflagration.

Even after Barak's February 2001 electoral defeat to Ariel Sharon, probably Israel's most illustrious and offensive-oriented general, it took over a year of unprecedented terrorism that murdered hundreds of Israelis and spread mayhem in Israel's population centers before the IDF moved onto the

offensive and broke the backbone of Palestinian terrorism in the West Bank (but not Gaza). So much so that PM Sharon, who was elected on the crest of the hope that he would swiftly suppress the Palestinian terror war, was forced to justify this extraordinary delay with such platitudes as “restraint is power” and “what can be seen from here [the PM’s office] can’t be seen from elsewhere.”

Further deviations from the IDF’s hallowed precepts of initiative, maneuver, and shifting the fight to enemy territory were on display during the Second Lebanon War and Operation Protective Edge (2014), where the military leadership hoped to end the conflict via air strikes and only grudgingly committed ground forces at a later stage and in a highly circumspect fashion.

By way of concealing its declining appetite for ground operations, the IDF leadership persistently denied terrorism’s strategic threat to Israel’s national security, stressing the absence of a military solution to the problem and the attendant need for its resolution by political means. Hence Chief-of-Staff Moshe Yaalon’s assertion that Hezbollah’s political weakening would culminate in its rockets/missiles “rusting on their launchers”; and hence the stubborn ignoring of Hezbollah’s and Hamas’s cross-border underground terror tunnels and their hazards. As late as July-August 2014, while Israel was engaged in a full-scale war with Hamas, defense minister Yaalon and the IDF leadership, alongside the heads of Shin Bet and the National Security Council, continued to underplay the strategic significance of those tunnels, let alone provide the war cabinet with a concrete plan for their destruction—even though Hamas had used such a tunnel as long before as 2006 to infiltrate Israel, abduct an Israeli soldier, and kill two others.

IDF Chief-of-Staff Moshe Dayan (1953-58) famously quipped that he would rather have to restrain galloping horses than spur lazy mules. The humiliating May 2000 Lebanon flight accelerated the transformation of the IDF’s leadership in the opposite direction while greatly enhancing the dangers to Israel’s national security on the Lebanese and Palestinian fronts to hitherto unprecedented levels. One can only hope that its twentieth anniversary will be used for genuine reflection, stocktaking, and route correction rather than for the customary platitudes.

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